

Postprint: A Study on Fan Participatory Culture in “A Dream of Splendor”

Authors: Gu Nannan

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Abstract

Currently, media development has entered a period of rapid growth for new media, with the iteration between old and new media continuing. The traffic and popularity generated by web dramas have brought netizens together to discuss plotlines and engage in secondary cultural creation. Since its premiere in 2022, the television series “Meng Hualu” has achieved favorable viewership ratings, yielding remarkable economic benefits for Tencent Video. This success is inseparable from the collective efforts of “Meng Hualu” fans, who have volunteered to express their opinions on platforms such as Douban, Weibo, Bilibili, and Tencent Video. This article will analyze the reasons behind the success of “Meng Hualu” by examining the psychological motivations and behavioral characteristics underlying fans’ participatory creation.

Full Text

A Study of Fan Participatory Culture in *A Dream of Splendor*

Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication, Beijing 100000

Abstract

As media development enters a period of rapid growth in new media, the iteration between old and new media continues. The traffic and popularity of web dramas have brought netizens together to discuss plotlines and engage in secondary cultural creation. Since its premiere in 2022, the television drama *A Dream of Splendor* has achieved strong viewership ratings and generated remarkable economic benefits for Tencent Video. This success is inseparable from the collective efforts of the drama’s fans, who have volunteered their time to express opinions across platforms including Douban, Weibo, Bilibili, and Tencent

Video. This paper analyzes the psychological motivations and behavioral characteristics underlying fan participation in *A Dream of Splendor*, examining the reasons for its success to provide reference for broadcast strategies and trending schedule planning of other drama series.

Keywords: television drama; audience participation; participatory culture

1. Story Synopsis of *A Dream of Splendor*

1.1 Story Origins

On June 2, 2022, *A Dream of Splendor* premiered on Tencent Video. The title draws from the Song Dynasty writer Meng Yuanlao's prose work *Dreams of Splendor in the Eastern Capital*, which vividly depicts the prosperity of the Song capital Bianliang. The story itself is adapted from Guan Hanqing's Yuan Dynasty opera *Zhao Pan'er Rescues a Sister from a Brothel*. Through the adaptation by screenwriter Zhang Wei and director Yang Yang, the series foregrounds two main narrative threads: modern female consciousness and the vicissitudes of officialdom in the late Southern Song Dynasty. The former explores the sisterhood and romantic relationships of Zhao Pan'er, Sun Sanniang, Song Yinzhang, and others in Bianliang, interwoven with the male lead Gu Qianfan's experiences in official circles. In terms of genre, it is a female-centered ancient costume idol drama starring Liu Yifei, Chen Xiao, Liu Yan, and Lin Yun, which had already generated considerable buzz prior to broadcast. Searching "Dream of Splendor" on Tianyancha reveals that since 2013, 21 trademarks bearing this name have been registered, with companies distributed across southern cities including Shanghai, Nanjing, Suzhou, Shenzhen, and Hong Kong, as shown in Figure 1.1.1 [Figure 1: see original paper]. Following the 2020 release of Disney's *Mulan*, starring Liu Yifei, which sparked intense domestic and international response, the actress's low output made this drama particularly satisfying for her numerous fans.

1.2 Netizen Reviews

As of December 5, 2022, *A Dream of Splendor* holds a Douban rating of 8.0, based on 802,192 viewers, as shown in Figure 1.2.1 [Figure 1: see original paper]. This represents a decline from its initial rating of 8.3 at the June 2 premiere. Tencent Video users have given it a slightly higher rating of 8.9, with 热度 (popularity) maintained at 31,000. Currently, the Douban "Dream of Splendor" group has 115,000 members, featuring five sections: Plot Discussion, Half-Covered Face, Materials/Secondary Creation, Cast & Crew/Behind the Scenes, and Science/Data. Tencent Video's "Discussion" area similarly provides a platform for individual expression, with five sections—Hot, Latest, Episode-Specific, Cast Drop-ins, and Plot Analysis—that align with the platform's characteristics and bridge the distance between fans and stars. As of December 5, 2022, the "TV Drama Dream of Splendor" super-topic on Sina Weibo has gathered 161,000 fans, 57,000 posts, and 1.3 billion reads, as shown in Figure 1.2.2 [Figure 1: see

original paper].

However, some viewers note that while adapted from the Yuan opera *Rescuing a Sister from a Brothel*, the drama fails to reflect female resistance consciousness. In the original Yuan opera, Zhao Pan'er, a courtesan herself, uses her wits to rescue her sister Song Yinzhang from the abusive Zhou She and punish him, with Guan Hanqing unflinchingly portraying women's circumstances regardless of their status. In the TV adaptation, however, the female lead Zhao Pan'er initially feels ashamed of her past identity. Though already freed from her registered courtesan status, she withdraws from music and dance performances to hide her talents, instead learning accounting to prepare for her future as a teahouse and restaurant owner—yet she tells Song Yinzhang to “practice your pipa well to get freed from your status soon.” From this perspective, logical inconsistencies exist in the character, which explains some low Douban ratings.

Data from Zhishi Shijian shows that the drama's popularity peaked on Weibo searches on June 5, with 871 accounts publishing 929 related posts during that period. The trigger was a topic and hashtag posted by *News Morning Post* at 11:30 AM: “#CanDreamOfSplendorMaintainItsStrongStart# [‘Fairy Sister’ Becomes ‘Rural Woman’? *Dream of Splendor* Is Quite Interesting] #LiuYifeiChenXiaoDreamOfSplendorDoubanRating8.3#.” The account posted follow-up information at 11:37 AM: “#LiuYifeiChenXiaoDreamOfSplendorDoubanRating8.3#, Do You Agree with This Score?” as shown in Figure 1.2.3 [Figure 1: see original paper].

1.3 Significance of the Topic

These fan-organized posts have transformed “Dream of Splendor” into a sustainable discussion community. Audiences watch the drama with a magnifying glass, sharing details that allow viewers to discover individual meaning through group identity while enabling capital to recognize the drama's commercial value, as evidenced by data from various platforms and advertisements within the series. This paper focuses on analyzing fan posts about *A Dream of Splendor* across three apps—Douban, Tencent Video, and Sina Weibo—examining the psychological motivations behind fan participation and analyzing the characteristics of fan engagement to provide reference for broadcast strategies and trending schedules of other series.

2. Psychological Motivations for Fan Creation

The concept of “fan” originates from Western religion, with the English term “fans” defined by Henry Jenkins as literally “fanatical masses in church.” This later evolved to mean “individuals influenced by secret sexual rituals in worship ceremonies who become extremely enthusiastic” (*Oxford Latin Dictionary*) [1]. In the Chinese context, fans refer to individuals who exhibit fanatical behavior toward a person, object, or activity, commonly seen in celebrity worship, such as the internet slang “to cheer/call” used to describe obsession with idols. Since

its broadcast, *A Dream of Splendor* has repeatedly topped trending searches, supported by capital but also evidenced by viewership on Tencent Video and discussions on Douban and Weibo. Analyzing fan psychology helps understand the logic behind fan behavior.

2.1 Individual Psychology: Emotional Catharsis

In Henry Jenkins's view, participatory culture refers to a culture where all netizens, based on identity recognition, actively create media texts and content on Web 2.0 platforms to fulfill social interaction needs, ultimately creating an equal and open new media form [2]. As individuals, fans participating in *A Dream of Splendor*-related content—such as plot speculation, detail analysis, historical background, character discussions, and promotional materials—do not necessarily know others in the same group. These weak-tie connections place both users and secondary creators in a relaxed state where emotional expression becomes mainstream. As of December 5, 2022, searching the keyword “hahaha” in the Douban “Dream of Splendor” group yields 564 latest and 133 popular results, as shown in Figure 2.1.1 [Figure 2: see original paper]. Using the Douban group as an intermediary, fan creations center on the drama's plot and cast, building a discussion community rooted in emotional needs—evident from the “hahaha” search results. Additionally, since Tencent Video's other ancient costume dramas have relatively poor viewership compared to iQiyi and Youku, netizens frequently discuss how *A Dream of Splendor* has brought opportunities to Tencent.

In his early research on fan culture, Jenkins attributed fan behavior to fascination with and frustration toward the corresponding culture [3]. This can be understood as fans' love for *A Dream of Splendor*'s adapted plot driving them to deeply analyze or secondarily create content about character dialogue, the intangible cultural heritage of “tea artistry” narrative, behind-the-scenes cast footage, and drama-related backgrounds—publishing information that brings them joy or helps other group members follow the drama. Frustration can be observed in “anti-fans” who voice opposition to individual opinions or plotlines within groups. Thus, against the backdrop of emotional catharsis, audiences have evolved from passive recipients in the television era to active decoders with significantly increased participation, as even “oppositional decoding” provides space for emotional release.

2.2 Group Psychology: Identity Recognition

As social animals, identity recognition serves as a reflective mechanism explaining individuals' sense of belonging in life. The number of likes, comments, forwards, and favorites in platform discussion areas represents whether individual members achieve identity recognition within the group.

Taking the Douban “Dream of Splendor” group as an example, among the “33,000 Group Discussions,” the post with highest engagement is titled

“Data/Science | Liu Yifei Dream of Splendor Zhao Pan’er’s Check-in Building,” published on June 12, 2022. As of December 5, 2022, it has received 8,901 replies, 173 likes, 1 forward, and 27 collections, with keywords concentrated on “Liu Yifei,” “Zhao Pan’er,” and “Dream of Splendor,” as shown in Figure 2.2.1 [Figure 2: see original paper]. Through co-creation, fans deepen communication among members—constructing self-identity on one hand, while group belonging lays the foundation for social identity recognition on the other.

In an era of instant expression, fan enthusiasm is no longer entirely official-led. Valuable opinions within fan groups can also draw widespread attention to the authors themselves. “Valuable” here refers to content that resonates and receives high fan acceptance. Once accepted, it indirectly amplifies individual identity within the group. In Sina Weibo’s “Dream of Splendor” super-topic, 精华 (featured) posts show high interaction. Additionally, highly interactive posts share these characteristics: video clips generate exponentially more engagement than text/image posts; high-quality posts remain in the “featured” section longer; and fan comment control is common, with leading fans monitoring the entire network and 及时调整 (timely adjusting) strategies for specific platforms.

On June 13, a user with the Weibo ID “WhoIsMay” posted titled “#DreamOf Splendor [!!!Important!!!] Cherish Drama-Watching, Jointly Create a Good and Harmonious Viewing Environment,” proposing that fans refrain from spreading or secondarily disseminating negative information about being “blackened,” and encouraging fans to use “board chat” to increase the drama’s 热度 (popularity). As of December 5, 2022, the post has received 915 likes, 210 comments, and 103 forwards, as shown in Figure 2.2.2 [Figure 2: see original paper]. The comment section primarily contains group identity-related messages such as “Record People,” “Return to Plot,” “Recommendation,” and “Don’t Move Negative Information.” When facing attacks from negative information, group members more easily unite, with active fans rallying together to confront anti-fans—a common phenomenon.

3. Characteristics of Fan Participatory Culture in *A Dream of Splendor*

As previously discussed, the psychology of fan participatory culture divides into individual-level emotional expression and group-level identity recognition. When these expressions reach certain levels, they often generate tremendous energy. On the Chinese internet, the primary measure of whether a topic can “break circles” is the “Weibo Hot Search List.” Since its premiere, *A Dream of Splendor* has topped the hot search list over 30 times, with each trending topic published not only by official accounts like “Weibo TV” and “Dream of Splendor,” but also by individual expressions within fan groups that resonate and trigger broader discussions. The characteristics of fan participatory culture can be categorized into three aspects: breadth of participatory content, specialization of production, and diversification of platforms.

3.1 Breadth of Participatory Content

In the Douban group, Weibo super-topic, and Tencent Video discussion area for *A Dream of Splendor*, fan-created content covers not only the work itself—such as broadcast platform, cast roles, plot design, and costumes—but also extends to broader discussions on female gaze in patriarchal society, tropes in Chinese ancient costume idol dramas, and marketing strategies. The aforementioned inconsistency in Zhao Pan'er's attitudes toward herself versus others has sparked further discussion on gender opposition. Taking Douban reviews as an example, top-ranked comments in the short review section analyze the lead characters' traits, as shown in Figure 3.1.1 [Figure 3: see original paper]. A user named “I'll Fish I'll Fish” wrote, “If you look down on courtesans, you don't have to film or market this. False advertising is disgusting,” receiving 8,554 likes—demonstrating how such interpretations and secondary creations easily become fodder for anti-fans.

These widespread discussions on work interpretation and secondary creation have paved the way for *A Dream of Splendor* to repeatedly break circles, with secondary dissemination establishing a foundation for the work's sustained traffic and increased attention. Vlinkage's data V-Chart shows that on June 18, *A Dream of Splendor's* web drama playback index reached 91.91, as shown in Figure 3.1.2 [Figure 3: see original paper].

3.2 Specialization of Production

Despite these discussions, they haven't affected fans' secondary creation of *A Dream of Splendor*. In the “Materials/Secondary Creation” section of the Douban “Dream of Splendor” group, netizens produce fan fiction, viral images, comic versions of characters, attention to works on other platforms, historical background excavation, emojis, and analyses of Zhao Pan'er's cabinet—generating heat within the fan community, with interaction levels shown in Figure 3.2.1 [Figure 3: see original paper]. The professional skills demonstrated in comic secondary creations are particularly impressive, as shown in Figure 3.2.2 [Figure 3: see original paper], providing a material foundation for fans' secondary dissemination.

3.3 Platform Diversification

As the earliest proponent of “transmedia storytelling,” Henry Jenkins first used the term in a 2003 *MIT Technology Review* article and later defined it on his blog in 2007 as: “a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience.”

Rapid technological development and mobile terminals have provided internet users with various platforms: Douban focuses on reading and viewing, Weibo emphasizes social interaction, Tencent Video transfers television audiences to online platforms, and Bilibili originated from anime. On these platforms, not

only can officially released information spread quickly and timely, but as netizens' information acquisition accelerates, user-published information can also diffuse rapidly in short timeframes. Fans have increasingly more channels to voice themselves, and in many cases, professional content attracts official accounts' attention and gets reposted—a common occurrence. Taking the Douban “Dream of Splendor” group as an example, netizens source information from Xiaohongshu, Weibo, Bilibili, Douban, and other platforms, which doesn't prevent other netizens from secondary dissemination. However, it should be noted that reposting should also address copyright issues, and obtaining original authors' authorization in a timely manner adds protection for cultural work interpretation.

4. Conclusion

The rapid development of the media industry has provided convenient opportunities for entertainment product dissemination, while increased audience participation has greatly facilitated the spread of *A Dream of Splendor*. Driven by individual emotional expression and group psychological identity, the drama's repeated breaking of circles owes much to fans publishing their creations across various platforms, triggering greater social attention and providing a case study for the dissemination of participatory culture in China.

References [1] Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, translated by Zheng Xiqing, Beijing: Peking University Press, 2016. [2] Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, translated by Zheng Xiqing, Peking University Press, 2016 edition. [3] Gao Zeyu. “Fan-Style Participatory Culture in Commercial Film Operations,” *News Dissemination*, 2022(02): 17-18.

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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